Christian Diversity

There is an enormous range of diversity with Christianity. This leads to an obvious question: What do all Christians have in common? Baptism? A belief that the teaching of Jesus are important? Nothing at all? The answer could be any of these. In fact, there is no definition of "Christian" which will satisfy everyone, and probably no definition which would include everyone who calls him or herself a Christian, while at the same time excluding those who do not claim to be Christians. We could say, "Everyone who has been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a Christian." But what about people who have been baptized and have renounced Christianity? Or what about people who were baptized in the name of God the Father, but not in the name of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit? Or what about people who have believe in God, but have no special belief about Jesus, who nevertheless call themselves "Christians"?

Probably the fairest way to identify what Christians have in common is to follow what a majority of Christian churches claim about themselves. But in doing this we have to recognize that we will be excluding some groups who call themselves Christians, but who are not considered Christians by the majority of Christian churches.

The standard in ecumenical dialogue among Christians is that those churches who can say or affirm the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed are Christians, while those groups who cannot affirm it, such as Mormons and Unitarians, are not Christians. On this definition, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, mainline Protestant denominations like Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Reformed, most evangelical churches, most Pentecostal churches. And most so-called Fundamentalist churches, are Christians, while groups like the Mormons, Unitarians, and Jehovah's Witnesses are not Christians—because they cannot affirm the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 C.E.) reads as follows:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through Him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
He came down from heaven:

by the power of the Holy Spirit
He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered death and was buried.
On the third day He rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and His kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father.*
With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.

Roman Catholics and Protestants add “and the Son” at this point. This, however, is an addition to the original creed.

This creed asserts that the second person of the Trinity, the *Logos* (Greek) or “Son” is one in being with God the Father, and therefore is divine. This Son became incarnate (enfleshed) and took on a human nature in Jesus, the Son of Mary or Nazareth. It is too simple, however, to say that “Jesus is God.” It is more correct to say that Jesus is God incarnate, that is, the divine person of the Son or *Logos* took on a human nature, and so is manifested and expressed through the human being Jesus. The Creed also states that Christian believe in the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, and is worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son. The Spirit, then, is also divine. This is the doctrine of the Trinity, though the Nicene Creed does not make clear how the three persons of the trinity relate to one another.

Historic Divisions

The Council of Nicaea was convened in 325 C.E. by the emperor Constantine to settle the dispute between Catholic Christians and the so-called Arians. The Arians (followers of Arius, a priest at Alexandria) held that the Son or *Logos* was NOT divine, and was NOT one with God, but was like a second God, or a creature, created by God (like the angels), and having a beginning in time. The Arians’ slogan was: “There was a time when he (the Son) was not.” meaning that the Son had been created in time (and was not therefore one with God). Eventually, Arianism died out, but a modern American group, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, holds a very similar position, that Jesus is not the incarnation of the divine Son, but is the incarnation of something like an archangel. The Jehovah’s

Witnesses, therefore, do not affirm the Nicene Creed, and are not considered Christians by other Christian churches (though the Witnesses call themselves Christians).

The next major historic division with in Christianity occurred after the churches of Armenia and Ethiopia refused to accept the Council of Chalcedon (in 453), which other ChristianChurches accepted. The Council of Chalcedon had affirmed that Jesus had both a divine nature and a human nature, united in one person, and was therefore both fully human and fully divine. The non-Chalcedonian churches claimed that Jesus had only one nature, a divine nature, and were therefore known as "Monophysite" (Greek for "one nature") churches. These churches, however, have recently (in the twentieth century) re-joined with the Orthodox church, and are no longer separated churches.

The Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church separated formally in 1054, though there had been growing tension for centuries before that.

These churches are still separated. The main issues were (1) the authority of the papacy, (2) the so-called 'Filioque' clause in the Creed, (3) the existence of Purgatory, as well as other minor issues. These will be considered in order. The Eastern church, while it accepted the pope (the bishop of Rome) as the "first [bishop] among equals," was and is not willing to grant the pope any authority over bishops in the Eastern Orthodox church. The extent of papal authority became a point of disagreement between the Orthodox and Catholic chuches. (2). The Western church had added a phrase (actually a single word in Latin: '*filioque*' --meaning "and the Son")--to the Creed, so that the Creed as said in the Western churches reads "We believe in the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*." The Eastern Church objected that this was an illicit addition to the Creed. Finally, the Eastern Church did not (and does not) accept the belief in Purgatory as developed in the Western church.

Thus the Orthodox churches (the Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Antiochian Orthodox, etc.) to this day differ from the Roman Catholics in that they do not recognize the authority of the pope, or of ecumenical councils after the first seven councils, they do not say the words "and the Son" in the Creed, they allow their priests to marry, they allow divorce. Otherwise, however, they are very similar to the Catholics. They recognize and accept the authority of the first seven ecumenical councils (which Catholics also accept), they recognize seven sacraments, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, their mass is similar to that of the Catholics, and their church is governed by bishops, as is the Catholic Church.

Another issue which emerged in the nineteenth century is the Catholic doctrine of the Infallibility of the Pope. Catholics believe that, under certain carefully defined circumstances, the pope can, issue an irreformable statement, concerning faith and morals, but only when he is speaking as the supreme Pastor of the Church (infallibility does not extend to his personal statements). The Orthodox rejects this, and considers the doctrine heretical (as do Protestants).

There has been extensive discussion between Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches in the hope of achieving unity, but so far these discussions have not resulted in a reunification of these churches.

The Protestant Reformation

Various Protestant Churches separated from the Roman Catholic Church (and from one another) during the sixteenth century. There were many issues involved. Perhaps the simplest approach is to describe the reforms of Martin Luther, which most Protestants followed and still follow. After discussing Luther's reforms, we can consider the various Protestant denominations individually.

Lutherans sum up Luther's reforms in three Latin phrases: *Sola Scriptura; Sola Fideii, Sola Gratia*—only scripture, only faith, only grace. Each of these phrases requires an explanation. *Sola Scriptura* means that scripture is seen as foundational in questions of Christian doctrine by Lutherans (and by all other Protestants). Luther asserted that in deciding any issue, the statements of scripture have authority over the statements of popes and church councils. For example, Luther rejected the existence of Purgatory and prayer to the saints, because these are not mentioned in scripture (whereas the Roman Catholic Church taught, and still teaches, the existence of Purgatory and the value of praying to the saints, based primarily on church tradition). Again, Luther rejected five of the traditional seven sacraments because they were not clearly instituted by Christ in the scriptures. For similar reasons, he rejected the authority of the papacy, the institution of monasticism, the fasting duties associated with Lent, pilgrimages, and other church practices. Virtually all Protestants, except the Anglicans, followed Luther is insisting on the primacy of scripture over both church tradition, councils and popes.

Sola Fideii, 'only faith' meant that for Luther that Christians are awarded salvation solely on the basis of their faith in God and Jesus Christ, not as a reward for any good works they might have done. Luther did argue (in *On Christian Liberty*) that Christians should do works serve their neighbor and to discipline their bodies. But these good works count for nothing when it came to being justified before God and Christ, and hence being saved; only our faith in God and Christ mattered. Luther compared the soul to a bride who is wedded to Christ, who takes all the sins of the soul and in turn gives the soul his own righteousness. It is by this righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, rather than its own righteousness, that the soul is judged as just or sinful, and hence as saved or damned. In this Luther differed from the Catholic church, which taught that faith was primary in justification, but that works also counted towards salvation. All Protestants except the Anabaptists followed Luther in this opinion (Anabaptists, however, still hold that good works count towards salvation.)

Sola Gratia meant that we are saved solely due to the grace of God, not our own merit or effort. Indeed, according to Luther, we can contribute nothing towards our salvation; it all depends on God and Christ. The Catholic church, on the other hand, insisted that we can cooperate with God's grace, and either accept it or refuse it. This cooperation is a result of our free will. John Calvin, and his followers, agreed with Luther, not with the Catholics.

Calvin drew the logical conclusion (which Luther did not draw) that God predestines each person either to heaven or to hell, and there is nothing that the person can do about it. Modern Calvinists (Presbyterians and Reformed churches) mostly have rejected this doctrine of double predestination, but it was strongly held by Calvin and by generations of Calvinists after him, including the English Puritans and the Pilgrims who founded Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Luther made other reforms as well. He rejected the existence of Purgatory, the efficacy of prayer to the saints, the canonization of saints, monasteries, pilgrimages, five of the traditional seven sacraments (he retained baptism and Eucharist or Holy Communion). Though Luther (and Calvin) personally retained their devotion to Mary, Lutherans and Calvinists after them abandoned devotions to Mary, and devotional prayers to Mary, like the rosary. And of course Luther rejected entirely the authority of the papacy, arguing that the papacy had become a tyranny over the church. Luther declared that all Christians are priests (the priesthood of all believers), and that the mass is not a sacrifice. Therefore, Lutherans ordain ministers, but not priests, and their ministers are allowed to marry. There are bishops in Lutheranism, but they are elected (whereas in Catholicism they are appointed by the pope, after consultation with bishops and cardinals).

Almost all of Luther's reforms were taken up by other Protestant churches, with two exceptions. The Anglicans—originally the Church of England-- retained the traditional Catholic mass and the seven sacraments, but declared that the King of England, not the pope, was the head of the church. The King, through parliament, appoints the archbishop of Canterbury, who is the head of the EnglishChurch. The EnglishChurch also rejected the existence of Purgatory, prayer to the saints, and King Henry VIII closed all the English monasteries (and expropriated their lands and holdings). But the EnglishChurch did retain a strong sense of the importance of tradition. In the United States, the EpiscopalianChurch is part of the Anglican communion, as is the Anglican Church of Canada, and Anglican churches in countries such as Ireland, South Africa, Australia, and many other former English colonies.

the Anabaptist churches also differed substantially from Luther. In the first place, they rejected infant baptism, and re-baptized their members as adults (hence their name, which means re-baptizers). They also were typically pacifist, which meant they would not serve in armies or in the police force, nor hold public office (because that swearing an oath of office, and they were opposed to taking oaths, based on Jesus words in Mathew 5:34 " But I say to you 'Do not swear at all…') . Because they were regarded as anarchists, the Anabaptists were persecuted by Catholics, Lutherans, and other Christian groups. Eventually they were run out of Europe, and emigrated to the United States and Canada, where they did not have to serve in the military and were allowed to have their own schools. The modern day descendants of the Anabaptists are such groups as the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Hutterites. Baptists are similar to the Anabaptists in some respects (they baptize only adults) but not in others (they are not pacifists, they do not think that works count towards salvation).

All these groups—Orthodox, Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed (Calvinist) Churches, and Anabaptists-- therefore were in existence by the end of the sixteenth century. Since that time some other major Protestant denominations have appeared: Quakers separated from the English Puritans in the seventeenth century, Calvinists split into Presbyterians and Congregationalists, the Methodists separated from the English church in the 18th century, and so on. But the real explosion of Protestant denominations occurred when Protestantism came to the United States.

Twentieth Century and Contemporary Developments.

There is not space here to catalogue all the hundreds of Protestant groups which came into existence in the U.S. in the last few centuries. Instead, we will discuss a few major developments.

Penetecostal churches began in the U.S. about 1906, during the so called Azusa Street Revival in Azusa (a suburb of Los Angeles). Pentecostal churches place great emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues, healing, performing miracles, prophecy, and other gifts. They take their inspiration from Acts, chapter 2, in which the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and began to speak in foreign languages (tongues) and perform healing miracles. The Book of Acts presents the early Church as expanding under the power of the Holy Spirit, and Pentecostal churches, such as the Assemblies of God, see themselves as likewise empowered by the Spirit.

Free Churches: today in the U.S. there are many churches which claim to be non-denominational or "free" churches. These are Protestant churches, which typically are similar to Baptist churches in that they are not part of any larger denomination or organization (in theory at least every Baptist church is independent). Free churches, like Baptist churches, are independent churches in which the congregation itself elects the minister, and controls the church. Such churches do not answer to bishops, or elders, or to any higher authority. Thus the appellation "free churches."

Contemporary Issues

In the twentieth century, a number of issues arose which have been church dividing, but which were not part of the Protestant Reformation before the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries. These issues are: the ordination of women, the ordination of practicing homosexual pastors, approval of same sex marriage, abortion, and the literal (as distinct from the symbolic) reading of scripture, especially Genesis 1-11.Non of these issues were concerns during the Reformation period. But during the twentieth century, these issues have separated so-called Fundamentalist Protestant churches from so called "liberal" or mainstream Protestant churches. In some cases, they have divided historic denominations. Lutherans for example, are split between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod Lutheran churches. The latter do not ordain women, whereas ELCA churches do; the latter would deny evolution

and read Genesis 1-11 as a more or less accurate history of the earth, whereas the ELCA would accept an evolutionary history of the earth. Recently, the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. ordained a practicing homosexual, Gene Robinson, as bishop of Massachusetts. But this has resulted in several Episcopal dioceses, (e.g. Forth Worth) seceding from the Episcopal Church U.S.A., and setting up parallel Episcopal churches under different bishops. This new set of issues is not only religiously divisive, it has been politically divisive, at least in the U.S., with Fundamentalist and traditionalist churches favoring Republicans and liberal churches favoring Democrats. Note that these issues, however, though they are sometime bitterly contested, do not affect fundamental Christian teachings like the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, or what books constitute the New Testament. On these foundational issues, there is little disagreement in the Christian churches. Rather, it is issues of church governance, the interpretation of scripture, gender issues, abortion, and sexuality which now tend to divide the churches.

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